

FOR LOVE OF A LANCASHIRE LASS,

OR, THE QUEEN OF THE FACTORY.

BY J. MONK FOSTER.

AUTHOR OF "A PIT BROWN LASSIE," "THE BLACK MOSS MYSTERY," "A MINER'S MILLION," ETC.

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CHAPTER XVIII.—ANOTHER COMPACT.

It was an upper apartment of the snug little house, at the bottom of Millgate, the same room in which mine host had shown the factory lass her mother's portrait—Dan Ashton and Walter Mayhew were seated, one afternoon about a week after the commencement of the factory strike at Warringtonham.

It was very miserable outside; the long frost had at last broken; a keen thaw had set in; the snow was quickly disappearing from the roofs, fields, streets, and the bareness of the town were inches deep in an icy, sloopy mass of melted snow and mud, which penetrated the steepest shoes and chilled the most vigorous feet.

The shutters were drawn, the gas was lighted, the door closed, a cheerful fire blazed in the high old-fashioned grate, and Dan and Mayhew were seated, one on each side of the hearth, their legs stretched out to catch the pleasant fire-draw.

A small table was drawn up to the edge of the hearth, midway between the two, and within easy reach, and on it stood a couple of steaming glasses of hot punch.

"And now, Mayhew," Dan began as he sampled his brew, "what's this business—important business, I think you say—what do you mean by it?"

"Very important—very important!" Mayhew answered slowly, thoughtfully, and with considerable emphasis on the last two words, as he stirred his liquid and swallowed a hot mouthful. "I suppose," Ashton said, "that we can talk here without any fear of being overheard."

"Certainly," mine host responded with a keen look at the other. "Nancy is down below minding the bar, Nellie is out with that fellow, Elliot, I dare say," the younger man interrupted, bitterly.

"Can't say, but I dare say he is. Yes, we can talk here without any fear of being overheard," Dan said, his voice falling a little, and his thoughts wandering back to that evening many years ago when he had put a similar question to Mr. Richard Harwood.

"What I have to speak about, Ashton," Mayhew began slowly, and with a serious look, "concerns yourself, Nellie Pemberton, and Richard Harwood."

"The devil it does?" Ashton cried, thinking of the one solitary subject in which the trio named by Mayhew were concerned.

"Yes—you know what I mean. There is not another who effects you all?"

"But—but I don't know!" Dan replied with a sudden heart sinking. "I can't imagine what you are driving at. You will have to speak plainer, Mayhew."

"Dan took up his beverage hurriedly, and gulped a good deal of it down, in a vain endeavor to hide his confusion. Mayhew noted the effort and a smile flickered across his freckled visage."

"Well, I'll speak plainer then. You have not forgotten the arrangement you came to with Harwood so long ago? He says you still to keep your mouth closed. The child, of course, is Nellie Pemberton. Is that plain enough, Dan?"

"By G—!" burst from Ashton's lips as he jumped to his feet. "How did you get to know this? Who told you?"

"You are satisfied then that I know?" the younger man asked with a laugh.

"You must know—and, yet, for the life of me, I cannot see how you got to know. Harwood wouldn't tell, and no one else could!"

"Except yourself, Dan."

"And I was so more likely to blab the thing out than Harwood," Dan muttered. "Tell me how you got to know."

"It was partly accidental, partly design. The first inkling I received of the secret actually fell at my feet, the rest I contrived to get possession of by a little scheming."

"But how? how?" Ashton asked excitedly. It seemed to him a wonderful thing that the carefully guarded secret of so many years should have at last leaked out, and in so unaccountable a manner.

"It was simple enough," Mayhew said, with a little hard laugh. "I suppose you know this letter?"

As he spoke he inserted his left hand in the inner pocket of his coat and drew therefrom a folded envelope addressed to "Mr. Richard Harwood." This he handed to Dan, who after staring at the opened cover for a moment, drew out the letter it contained and read it.

"THE STAR, November 20.—Dear Sir: You are very unwise in refusing to see me when I called on Friday night, and you will be unwise still if you even go down to admit me when I call. I don't mean to let you slip through my fingers now any more than I did years ago. Your secret is worth as much now as ever, even more, for the child, Nellie Pemberton, is a woman now, and she would be willing, I dare say, to give a good will if I could prove that she is the nearest to all you hold. But a bargain is a bargain, and I mean to keep it if you will. But if you won't, then you know what to expect. As sure as God's above us I'll expose you, and tell Nellie Pemberton everything. It will be easy to prove all, as you know. It will be a fine thing to see Richard Harwood, Esq., J. P., turned out of his house and all his owns, and have a factory wench put in his place. You know I can do this, and by G—I will if you provoke me so far."

"But you will have more sense, I think, than to do this. You will be wise, and send me the money as usual. Yours respectfully."

"Richard Harwood, Esq., J. P."

"This is not my letter—the letter I sent to Harwood—but it is a copy of it!" Dan cried out in a most excited way. "Where did you get it?"

"I copied it, Dan, from the original," Mayhew replied, smiling, as he took the sheet of newspaper from the other's trembling hand and replaced it in its pocket.

"But how did you manage to see my letter?" Dan asked, quivering, walking about the room in his agitation.

"It happened in this way. One day I

went into Harwood's office to consult him about something. He was out, having just been called away on some special business, so the clerks said when I inquired after him. On the floor of Harwood's room, as I went in, I saw a letter lying on the table. It was the one you sent him. I was prompted by curiosity to read it, and found it so extremely interesting that I copied it, then I put the letter on the desk where Harwood would be certain to find it."

"What an infernal ass Harwood was to leave such things about!" Dan burst out in ungovernable passion. Then he turned suddenly and faced Mayhew, saying: "Even now you know only a piece of the story. And what you do not know is of much greater importance than what you know!"

"Your letter," answered the other, with a confident smile, "only told me the unimportant part, as you say, but I know all now, I think."

"How?—you did not question Harwood, surely?"

"Oh, no, I only questioned you, and you told me all I desired to know."

"I told you?" Ashton gasped, and his wondering face was bent upon the other's face alone.

"Yes. You remember that afternoon last week when we went to Manchester together. You got beastly drunk that night, Dan, and—well, you were in a very talkative mood as we came home. I suppose you don't recollect. All the same you told me all I wanted to learn."

"Perhaps I did. What does it matter now how I went about it? I know all now, and mean to turn the knowledge to advantage—to use it to forward my own ends as you have done?"

"In what way?" Do you mean to bleed Harwood too? He will hardly stand that; I think you see how he has fought against pay-well keeping to his bargain with me, now."

"I don't mean in that way, Ashton."

"In what way, then?" Dan asked, eagerly. The discovery that Mayhew was in the secret had startled mine host considerably, and he was burning to know what personal use he intended to put the information he had gained.

"I will tell you," Walter began gravely. "Nellie Pemberton is now living beneath your roof; her foster-mother is your wife. You and Mrs. Ashton must necessarily have considerable influence with the girl. That influence must be used in my favor. You understand, Ashton?"

"You wish to make Nellie your wife?"

"That is it. I love her and have told her so often. If Mark Elliott had never come between us I should have won her, I am certain. You must help me, Dan, to drive Elliott out of the field. If you will promise to do this, no word of your secret and Harwood's may ever pass my lips. Is it to be a bargain?"

"Certainly," Dan cried, with a great sigh of relief. He had expected Mayhew to demand much more, as the price of his silence—had been prepared to give a great deal more than was demanded from him. "I suppose you know that Nellie and Elliott are engaged?" he added.

"Yes, but we must contrive by some means to end that."

"I will help you willingly in that," Dan said, and he meant it. "Why, Mayhew, before I ever knew that Nellie and Mark meant to make a match of it, I was doing all I could for you. You remember the night we had that bit of a stir here?"

"Well, I could see then, pretty plainly, that you were sweet on the wench, and I told her so—told her she might be a lady if she only played her cards right."

"And what did she say?" Mayhew demanded with evident eagerness.

"Well, to tell you the truth, she didn't seem to jump at the idea. The fact of that young chap risking his life to save her that time did the mischief. Lasses are so romantic, you know, Mayhew, and a thing of that sort always 'fatches' them."

"But you must see, Dan, that a girl like Nellie ought not to throw herself away on a common workman. She ought to marry well."

"Just what I told her, but she doesn't seem to see it. And Nancy likes Mark nearly as much as the wench does."

"Mayhew, I am sure you will do all right. It was still very unpleasant to him to hear of his rival's success."

"Well, the matter may be considered settled between us, Dan? And you pledge yourself to help me in this affair?"

"Of course. It is my pet scheme as well as yours, and I shall do all I can. Suppose we have another drink?"

Mayhew nodded, and Dan departed with the empty glasses, returning in a few minutes with replenished tumblers.

"There is one thing that may help us a lot, Dan," said the younger man thoughtfully, as he crushed the sugar into his glass.

"What is that?" Ashton asked as he performed a similar operation.

"Elliot is likely to find himself in trouble when this strike ends. He has said and done so much for the hands, and against the masters, that none of the strike is likely to find him when the strike is before it, and when he reaches the mill he half expected that he would be told to go about his business, as there was no further employment for him there."

But in this the young fellow was positively disappointed. He was permitted to go about his work as if nothing unusual had transpired during the past momentous weeks. The only change he noticed was the manager's unusual coldness and an added acidity in his speech.

But these trifles did not trouble Mark. The strained relations which had existed between masters and men up till last night would account for the change of

CHAPTER XIX.—AFTER THE STRIKE.

The strike was now in the fourth week of its duration, and as neither master nor work people showed any signs of giving way, the bitter struggle promised to last for some time yet.

Among the lowest class of operatives—those who spend every penny as it comes

the greatest imaginable misery already prevailed, and there were very few families in the town who were not experiencing the bitter pangs of hunger.

A relief fund had been started, but the donations received were woefully inadequate to meet the demands of the hungry thousands, and the utmost help that could be given, even to the most destitute, was barely sufficient to keep body and soul together.

All day long, from gray wintry day-break to bleak night, the streets were filled with the strikers. Gangs of men and women walked the slushy thoroughfares; others lounged at the corners of the old market square, and others thronged the old market square, and all talked of the situation, and wondered, or guessed how long their illnesses and privations would continue.

Several gangs of operatives had organized themselves into musical (?) bands and were scouring the country east and west, north and south, in search of alms to fill their own mouths and the bellies of their patient women and hungry children; they had left behind in Warringtonham.

Every morning, after the first week of the strike, a singular procession had paraded the leading streets. This was formed of a long file of handcarriers, each drawn by a cotton worker, and one by one every provision shop in the town was visited.

Some of the shopkeepers would give a loaf, another a few potatoes, another an egg or two, a pound of flour or meal. Everything was gladly accepted, and stored away in the carts, and when afternoon came, and the vehicles were filled with edible things, the men struck homeward and divided the spoil.

During the last few weeks the pawnshops had been doing a roaring trade, and thousands of things which had formerly adorned the persons or homes of the operatives were now stored away on the shelves of the Knights of Lombardy.

The public-houses, too, appeared to be doing well. Somehow, many of the strikers could often enough find a penny for a gill of ale when twopenny for a loaf seemed an impossibility. And it was quite common for the pitman and other workers to treat their working companions to numberless pots of beer when they met them on an evening, but they rarely thought of giving them a sixpence to buy food for the ill-fed ones at home.

And thus the weary war between capital and labor dragged on day after day, the workers wondering how much longer the masters would persist in their way, the employers asking themselves how much longer their employees could stand out.

One thing was certain. The men could not continue the unequal fight much longer. Starvation would at last subdue them, and that point would soon be reached unless help came from other towns.

A bitter feeling against the mill owners naturally enough filled the minds of all the strikers, and this feeling was strongest of all against Richard Harwood, for a rumor had gone round that he was the most relentless and implacable of all the employers.

It was even stated that what truth no one could say, that Harwood had said he would starve his hands into submission. After that statement went forth, it would have been extremely perilous for Harwood to have shown himself in the public streets. The licensed, despairing men and women would have torn him to pieces. But the merciless mill owner heard of this and he wisely kept out of harm's way.

Fortunately for themselves, Mark Elliott and Nellie Pemberton were much more happily situated than the immense bulk of their workmates. A strike of any length would not have made much difference to the girl now. She was sure of food and shelter so long as Dan Ashton had means to provide them.

As for Mark, he had contrived to put a few pounds by, and upon this little hoard he was now living. Although he had done more than any other man in obtaining his subsistence, he had not touched a penny of the money so procured.

With so many hundreds on the verge of starvation, he felt that it would be intolerably mean, unspeakably vile of him, were he to take the price of a single loaf when he had money of his own. And so he persisted in it to go to the mill and live on his own slender savings.

But black and bitter was that weary time to most of the cotton workers, it was not all trouble and pain to Mark and Nellie. They had health and strength and their love, and all the future lay before them. They were not yet old, and they were not yet poor.

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manner in old Tom Rayner. The manager would naturally identify himself with the employers, and so would consider himself one of the vanquished.

This was the way in which Elliot explained it, but that he was wrong he had to wait a little time to prove. With the bright hopefulness of his nature, he imagined that because the threatened, the feared blow had not fallen at once on his resuming work, it would not fall at all.

A week and a day or two spent themselves in the old fashion, and pay day came—the first since the strike ended. Then the blow fell, and falling as it did, at an unexpected moment, its force was all the greater.

When Mark received his wages on Saturday afternoon, he received also a written notice to quit Richard Harwood's employ in seven days. The lad's comely face grew very white when the full import of the note was realized, and his heart gave a great bound. But he uttered no word of complaint, he only clenched his teeth firmly, and drew a deep breath through his distended, quivering nostrils.

No steady honest, capable workman likes to be discharged. The act carries a stigma with it which every clever craftsman desires above all things to avoid, and Mark had certainly done nothing, or omitted to do anything within the limit which would justify his dismissal.

Of course he knew why notice had been given him. His letters to the inspector, and the local newspaper, and the prominent part he had afterwards played in the strike explained it all. Richard Harwood was not a man who threatened into a blow, and the only way in which the mill owner could strike him, was to expel him from his employment.

With a serious face and somewhat troubled heart, Mark hurried from the pay office to join his sweetheart who he knew would be waiting for him outside. He found Nellie and as they walked home together he told her the bad news.

"Never mind, Mark," the girl replied bravely, "there are more places in the world. And if old Harwood has stopped you here, he cannot prevent you getting work at some other mill."

Her cheerful words chased away the shadow from his face if they did not drive all feelings of fear from out of his mind. But with the sweet, fair lass at his side, it was impossible to feel cast down or to magnify and dwell upon what after all might prove only a trifling and temporary trouble.

When Mark returned to work the following morning, he had both the common sense and the courage to go straight to the manager, Tom Rayner, and demand the reason of his dismissal.

"Well," the manager said, somewhat confusedly, "I suppose you haven't given satisfaction. I'm sorry, lad. It's none of my doings. I got the word, and I had to do it."

"I understand!" was all the retort Mark made, and he went to his work, assured that Tom Rayner was blameless, as he had asserted, and that Richard Harwood alone was responsible.

That last week Elliot labored at the mill passed quietly, uneventfully away, and no sooner was it spent than he set about finding, or rather attempting to find employment elsewhere. But he soon discovered he had no easy task before him. Mill after mill in Warringtonham he visited; manager after manager he saw, but none offered him the work he sought.

Sometimes his applications were rejected with expressions of insult; occasionally the better hearted sort of factory managers appeared to be sorry that they could not employ him, but his overtures invariably ended in failure.

Having visited every mill in the town in vain, Mark went further afield, but with no more success. To him he was trapped to, sore-footed and heavy-hearted, continually repeating his application for work wherever he could find a cotton factory and being continually refused.

By this time Mark was thoroughly disheartened by his unsuccessful wandering in quest of work. The truth of the old saying was avoided. He was a marked man. Richard Harwood had warned all his brother cotton-spinners against him, and it was useless to carry on the bitter struggle any longer.

A suspicion of this sort had haunted him from the very beginning, but he had refused to believe that anything could be possible. But he was forced to accept that conclusion at last, when he had been refused employment at every cotton factory in the shire.

And now, for the first time in his life, Mark Elliott realized to the full, all the forebodings and truths those burning words of Burns contained.

See tender poor o'er labored night,
So silent, mean, and vile,
Who begs a brother of the earth,
And looks for his reward
His poor petition spurns.

"It is useless, Nellie, to fight any further against such odds!" he cried despondently to his sweetheart one evening when they were out together. "I see nothing before me now but leaving the country."

"But where can you go, Mark?" she asked, tremblingly, tenderly.

"To America!" he replied. "There a man has free scope, and he is not trodden upon by the news was too good to be true, or so before I came to Warringtonham. An old friend of mine went to the States. If I could hear from him I would join him there!"

"Do not think of going yet, dear!" she pleaded, a piteous break in her voice.

"Well a little longer, Mark. Something may turn up soon."

He only bit his lips in response to her brave words. His heart was sick already with hope deferred. He had waited and prayed in vain, so long that all hope of brighter and better days had vanished.

The thought of leaving his darling and going to the United States afforded him no pleasure. To part from her he loved so well was as bitter as death. But it was all that was left to do, for even if he sought work outside Lancashire the enmity of Harwood might follow him there also.

He knew that Nellie loved him with every fibre of her deep earnest heart—knew that poor as he was and penniless as he was, she would have shared his poverty had he asked her to do so.

But he was too proud to permit her to become a partner in his misery—he loved her too tenderly to allow her to wed him in the very winter of his discontent.

When he took the peerless lass to his altar it was to elevate her, not to drag her down.